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AUTHOR Koscielniak, James
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ABSTRACT

This survey provides information about the content of introductory economic courses. Responses from 62 midwestern college and university instructors of introductory economics characterize the content, methods, texts, and conceptual approaches currently used. Results of the study show that introductory courses teach supply and demand, product markets, national income accounts, fiscal policy, monetary policy, factor markets, consumer choice, and international economics. Community college instructors also tend to include history of economic thought, current economic problems, and comparative economic systems. Ninety-five percent of the instructors lecture--most with the reinforcement of discussion and programmed or audiovisual materials. Two texts, Samuelson's and McConnell's, are the most widely used. A macro-microeconomics approach to the course is used by 94 percent of the instructors. Our present, unpredicted economic state, compared with the relatively unvaried content of economic courses, suggests the need for new approaches, among them, perhaps, a chronological study of economic analysis, world-wide economic models, emphasis on psychological and philosophic determinants, and others. (JH)

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THE NATURE OF INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS COURSES

by James Koscielniak
Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, IL

In light of current economic problems the content of introductory economics courses should be summarized, analyzed and questioned. Recent economic develcpments have shown, at least to a degree, that our existing body of knowledge and theories are inadequate for predicting major economic trends. (Theory Deserts the Forecasters: 1974)

Current educational literature contains no summary of economic topics taught in introductory courses. However, there is information concerning what individual professors think should be taught. Two such essays are Coddington (1972) and Livesey (1973) which, incidentally, have contrary opinions. In addition the literature contains "teaching strategies" for specific topics, implying that these topics should be taught. (Lewenstein, 1973) Although no summary of economic topics is contained in the literature, eighteen of the twenty-one textbooks frequently used in introductory economics courses contain very similar topics.

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This study is intended to summarize the:

- breadth of economic areas taught in introductory economics courses
- modes of instruction used in presenting introductory economics courses
- textbook selection of instructors

The study compares the information for community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. A further objective is to improve articulation among institutions.

It is hoped that this study will provide information that will lead to a uniformity of economic knowledge taught in introductory economics courses to allow proper articulation. At the same time, it is hoped that this study will allow instructors enough time to attack economic questions from a point of view conducive to fulfilling their students' needs.

PROCEDURES

A questionnaire survey was developed to determine the: 1) content, 2) mode of instruction, 3) approach, and 4) textbook selection of instructors in introductory economics courses. In 1974 the survey was: 1) sent to one-hundred and eight (108) instructors of introductory economics courses at colleges and universities in the State of Illinois; and 2) distributed to approximately thirty-five (35) instructors of introductory economics courses at the 1974 Midwest Economics Convention in Chicago. A total of sixty-two (62) surveys were returned and used in the study representing sixty-two (62) colleges and universities. Twenty-three (23) surveys represented instructors of introductory economics courses at twenty-three (23) two-year community colleges and thirty-nine (39) surveys represented instructors at thirty-nine (39) four-year colleges and universities.

In determining the content of Introductory Economics courses it was assumed that all schools teach 1) supply and demand and 2) production markets.

The content of introductory economics courses is analyzed by the percentage of schools teaching various topics by institutional type and for the composite. The significance of the difference between the number of community colleges and four-year institutions teaching various topics was measured using Yule's Q.

The mode of instruction is analyzed by the percentage of schools using various modes and by institutional type and composite. The significance of the difference between community colleges and four-year institutions using various modes of instruction was measured by the percentage difference.

Textbook selection is analyzed by the number of instructors using various textbooks and by institutional type and composite. Textbooks are also ranked by institutional type and composite.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 summarizes the content of introductory economics courses by institutional type and composite. The survey shows that seventy-five percent (75%) of all schools teach

national income accounts,
fiscal policy,
monetary policy,
consumer choice,
factor markets, and
international economics.

In general, community colleges and four-year colleges and universities cover these topics with equal frequency.

Community colleges, to a moderate to substantial degree, have a tendency to include: 1) comparative economic systems, 2) economic problems, and 3) history of economic thought in their introductory courses more often than four year colleges and universities. In addition, instructors teach various topics of student interest. For example, instructors in southern Illinois teach agricultural economics and instructors in large cities include urban problems and environmental pollution analysis in their courses. Other instructors provide education in their areas of specialization such as econometrics, history of economic thought, and governmental regulations. The percentage of schools teaching various topics appears in Figure 1.

— FIGURE I —

CONTENT OF INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS COURSES

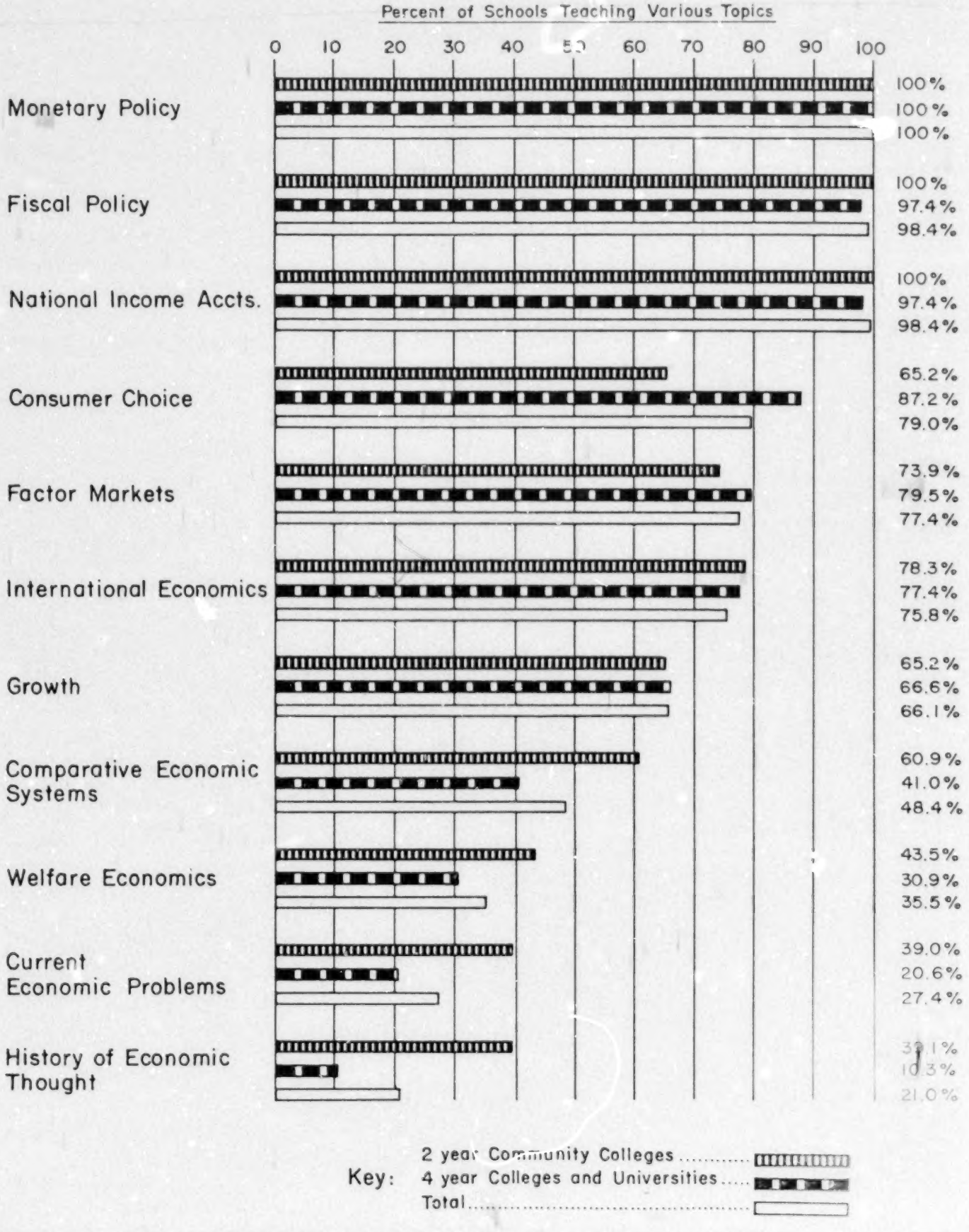
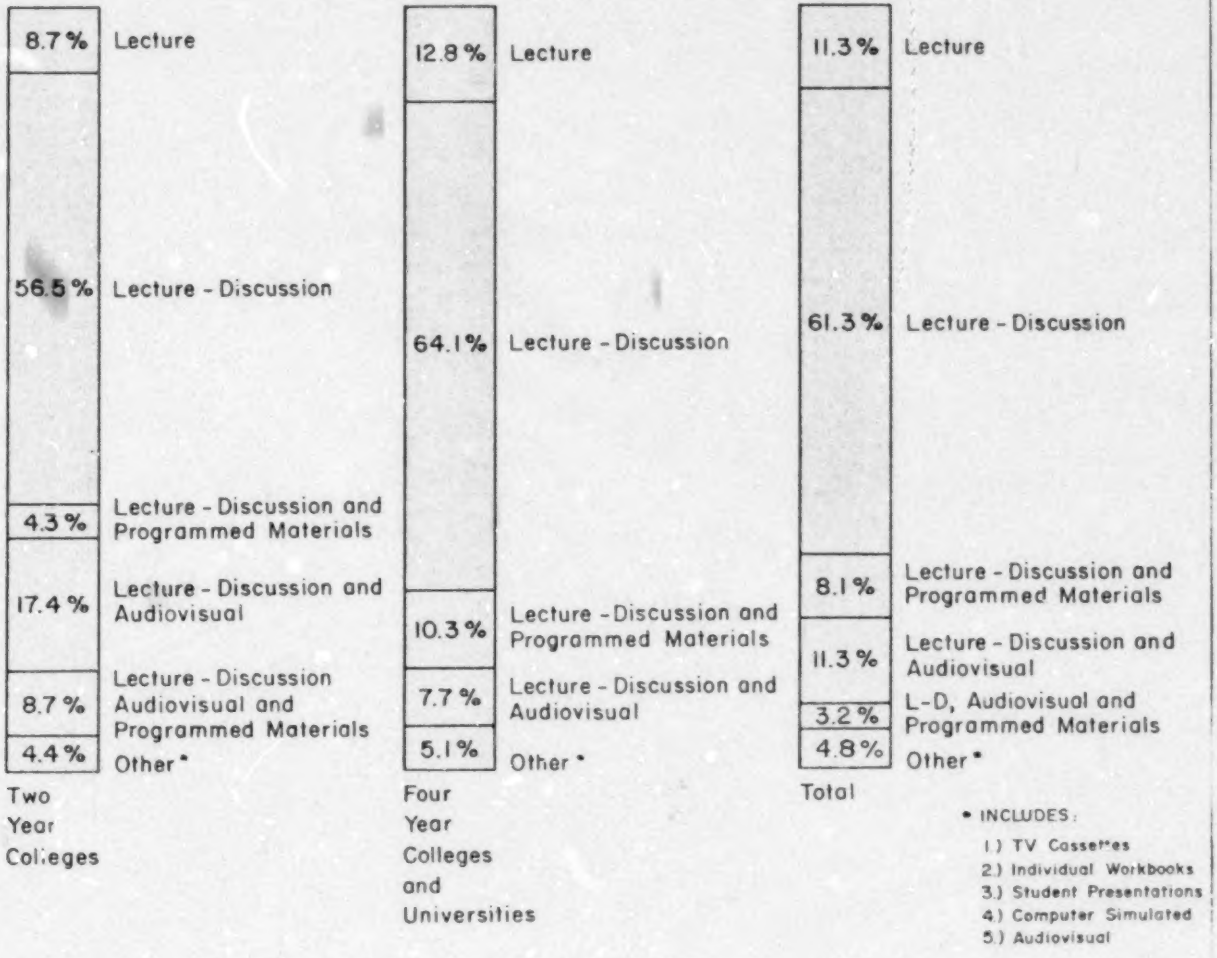


Figure 2 summarizes the mode of instruction of introductory economics courses by institutional type and composite. Almost three-fourths of economics instructors use lecture or lecture-discussion modes to introduce their subject. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the instructors use lecture, lecture-discussion, or lecture discussion modes reinforced with programmed materials, audio-visual resources or both. Four year colleges and universities have a low tendency to use lecture or lecture-discussion modes more often than community colleges.

-FIGURE 2-

MODES OF INSTRUCTION



APPROACH

According to the survey, ninety-four percent (94%) of instructors at community colleges and four-year colleges and universities approach introductory economics from a macro-micro view point. Six percent (6%) approach the subject from other points of view; namely, 1) history of economic thought, 2) concepts and analysis without distinguishing between macroeconomics and microeconomics, and 3) issues and problems. There is no significant difference between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities in the approach to the subject matter.

TEXTBOOK SELECTION

As expected, the textbooks of Dr. Paul Samuelson and Dr. Cambell McConnell continue to be the most widely used. However, many other texts have been introduced and accepted into the market. Twenty-one (21) different textbooks were reported by the sixty-two (62) respondents of the survey. The leading textbooks appear below.

Rank of Popularity of Leading Textbooks				No. of Instructors Using Various Texts		
Author*	Total	2 Year	4 Year	Total	2 Year	4 Year
Samuelson	1	2	1	16	4	12
McConnell	2	1	2	11	5	6
Spencer	3	3	4	7	3	4
Heilbroner	4	3	5	6	3	3
Miller	5	5	2	6	0	6

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Heilbroner, Robert L., The Economic Problem, Third Edition, Prentice-Hall, Englewood, New Jersey, 1972. (Several instructors use shorter versions: Understanding Macroeconomics, Fourth Edition and Understanding Microeconomics, Second Edition, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1972)

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Instructors of introductory economics courses recognize the necessity of teaching certain economic topics; namely, 1) supply and demand, 2) product markets (pure competition, monopoly, oligopoly and monopolistic competition), 3) national income accounts, 4) fiscal policy, 5) monetary policy, 6) factor markets, 7) consumer choice (consumer preferences), and 8) international economics. Community college instructors tend to include: 1) history of economic thought, 2) current economic problems, and 3) comparative economic systems in the introductory economics courses more often than instructors at four-year colleges and universities. It would be interesting to discover the percentage of class time allotted to each topic.

The modes of instruction in most introductory economics courses can be categorized as traditional. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the instructors surveyed use lecture, lecture-discussion, or lecture-discussion modes reinforced with programmed materials, audio-visual aids or both in presenting introductory economics courses. Four-year colleges and universities tended to use traditional lecture or lecture-discussion modes more often than two-year community colleges.

Economic structure, theory, and problems are attacked from the approach of macroeconomics and microeconomics by ninety-four percent (94%) of the instructors responding to the survey. The remaining six percent (6%) approached economics through a perspective of history, current problems, and a mixture of related principles without clear reference to macro- or micro-economics.

In our present troubled economic situation - in particular the economic problems revealing themselves in simultaneous inflation and unemployment - it would seem that new approaches to presenting introductory economics courses should be attempted. A few possibilities are: 1) a chronological study of economic analysis, 2) world-wide economic models, 3) a study emphasizing psychological and philosophical determinants of economic behavior, 4) an evolutionary study of political economics and/or 5) an emphasis on normative or policy economics as opposed to pure or positive economics. Possibly these approaches may be tested in existing introductory economics courses provided the previously stated major economic topics are included.

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